



abrahamic reflections
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2010-2011 Undergraduate Journal
Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions

Volume 3



Lubar Institute
for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions
University of Wisconsin–Madison



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A letter from the Director



In an otherwise forgettable recent made-for-TV movie, one line struck home. A young, idealistic woman who has chosen to serve at a makeshift clinic ministering to an impoverished clientele in the deepest backwoods of Central America explains her presence to the film's protagonist, who is trying to rescue the staff and their patients from a band of rebel military intent on killing them: she wants to do good. But, she confides, the number of people trying to make the world better is far exceeded by the number trying to make it worse.

The LISAR staff has not, fortunately, had to flee from rogue operatives, but I can sympathize with this character's weariness; the path of good intentions is often paved with hell. If Abrahamic conversations were easy, LISAR would not need

to exist. Still, each effort to advance them does its small part to frustrate those who would make the world more unlivable by segregating people by sect. Like its predecessors, this issue of the Undergraduate Journal shows students opening interfaith communications: visiting a Lutheran Church in the town of Milton, Wisconsin, to explain what they do at the Institute; asking the first female Dean of Shari'a in an Arab country about Islam (in the process, exemplifying how religious pluralism works in the United States); and putting together an interfaith Seder that truly demonstrates why "this night is different from all other nights."

Whenever I feel weary of pushing against those who would make the world worse, I refresh myself by thinking about these students.

Charles Cohen

Professor of History and Religious Studies;
Director, Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions

The Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions (LISAR) opened in July, 2005, testament to the vision and benefactions of Sheldon and Marianne Lubar of Milwaukee, WI. Concerned about rising religious tensions worldwide and believing Jews, Christians and Muslims to be capable of prolonged and honest inquiry into their common heritages and varying perspectives, they imagined a center that would advance mutual comprehension by mingling scholars with the general public, clergy with laity, and members of different faith communities with the citizens of Wisconsin, the United States, and the world. Through encouraging people belonging to and/or interested in the Abrahamic traditions to engage each other and to find out more about both these several traditions and their intersections, LISAR is dedicated to strengthening the values of religious pluralism so vital for sustaining American civil society and peaceful international discourse.

LISAR's mission emerges from the intimate yet often bitter relations that have historically existed between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Recognizing that the Abrahamic traditions share common origins and values, that their history has been deeply intertwined for some 1300 years, that much current popular as well as scholarly thinking tends to view them in isolation or as



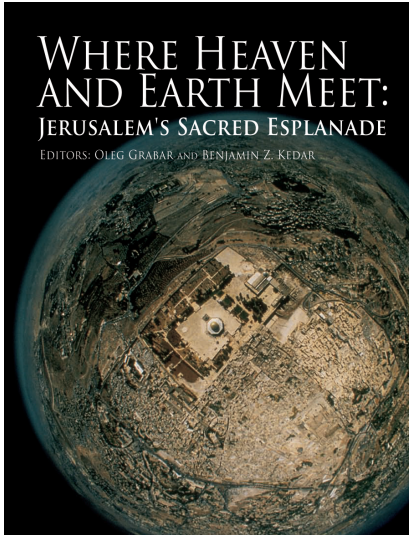
being antagonistic to each other, and that the legacy of misunderstanding and mistrust militates against peaceful discourse between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, LISAR seeks to cultivate greater understanding of these traditions and their relationships by encouraging on-going discussion of these traditions among scholars, members of those traditions, and the general public.

LISAR carries out its mission by running programs in two linked spheres, the academy and the larger community. The academic enterprise contributes to scholarship and provides intellectual scaffolding for the community-oriented activities, which invite individuals to meet with members of other traditions and which, in turn, inform scholars about emerging issues in the relationships among the Abrahamic faiths. The Institute's academic

projects include hosting the annual LISAR conference, offering lectures, publishing scholarly work, supporting initiatives concerning the Abrahamic faiths developed by other departments on campus, and contributing to the teaching mission of the UW Religious Studies program. Its community-oriented activities include campus projects such as the Undergraduate Forum and undergraduate fellowships, as well as off-campus works being developed under the auspices of the External Steering Committee, which is comprised of clerical and lay figures from around south-central Wisconsin. The merger of academic and community-oriented activities exemplifies the Wisconsin Idea, articulated by University President Charles Van Hise a century ago, that the walls of the University extend to the boundaries of the state. In the twenty-first century, those walls reach even farther.

Jerusalem's Sacred Esplanade: Divinity &

Renu Paul, Student Fellow



“the symposium was a successful beginning because knowledge, dispassion, and understanding met that autumn evening.”

While the President of the United States was making a campaign appearance on Library Mall, about one hundred and fifty people gathered at the Fluno Center to be part of the Lubar Institute's first event of 2010-11, "Jerusalem's Sacred Esplanade." Not only did members from the university community fill the seats with interest and attention, but an enquiring public from the Madison area and beyond was on hand to get a glimpse of inter-religious dialogue in action. A pessimist may say that no tangible solutions were forthcoming with regards to Jerusalem's contested space; nonetheless, the symposium was a successful beginning because knowledge, dispassion, and understanding met that autumn evening.

While the holy sites located on the Esplanade (also called "The Temple Mount" and "Al-Haram al-Sharif") have religious significance for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, imbued as they are with spiritual power and architectural splendor, the same space has been a deadly contest for power and control by radical religious elements, political elites, and their loyal followers. Eruptions of violence, political strife, and acrimony have been the continuing motifs surrounding the recent history of the Esplanade. This description of Jerusalem remains the norm rather than the exception today. Despite

the present controversies, off in the distance I hear the voice of Isaiah as a clarion call for Jerusalem's sacred space: "Come now, and let us reason together."

The spirit and ethos of Isaiah's voice was found in the introductory remarks of Kjell Magne Bondevik, the former Prime Minister of Norway and founder of the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights, which co-sponsored the symposium. Bondevik presented the Oslo Center's blueprint in the form of a Code of Holy Sites by which locations and memorials around the world that are sacred to more than one faith would be jointly administered under a climate of religious tolerance and cooperation. Although he gave no finer details on how the Code would be executed in the context of the Arab-Israeli impasse, this lack should not be taken as a deficiency of the Oslo Center's mission. Rather the Code at its core is a courageous attempt to bring inter-religious dialogue, political order, and collective will together. I recognize that the spirit of the document is rooted in the democratic ideals of justice, fairness and collective decision-making for all parties connected to the Esplanade. As a negotiating instrument for peace, the Code's potential for success lies in its rationality and civil procedure, directed towards the common good in an otherwise acrimonious environment where emotion

humanity meet on common ground

and high passions, distrust, and irrationality rule—all of which has led to recurring episodes of violence. I was also pleased to hear Bondevik stress the multi-dimensional nature of holy sites, not simply as religious phenomena per se, but political and cultural matters of concern as well. If the Esplanade can be better represented with such critical sensibility, then conceptualizing and planning for reconciliation can be a reality and not a faint dream in the sky.

The erudition of all the panelists of the symposium, three internationally-renowned scholars, Benjamin Kedar of Hebrew University, Mustafa Abu Sway of Al-Quds University, and Guy Stroumsa of Oxford was impressive. A medieval historian, Prof. Kedar introduced the newly released book *When Heaven Meets Earth: Jerusalem's Sacred Esplanade*, a volume he co-edited with Islamic art historian Oleg Grabar. He presented an outline of the book's birthing process as well as a brief coverage of the content. The three pictorial depictions of Jerusalem taken from the inside cover page display the importance of the space for Jews, Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac; for Christians, the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple; and for Muslims, Muhammad's Ascension from Jerusalem's Rock to Heaven. What is so unique about the book goes beyond its historical

and archaeological descriptions and explanations: it was the coordinated efforts of Hebrew University, Al-Quds University, and École biblique de Jérusalem to bring the volume to fruition in the first place.

Another highlight was Prof. Abu Sway's comments on the fraternal ties between Jews and Muslims and which have bound them together to Jerusalem's holy sites over the centuries. For example, along with verses from the Qur'an, around the Dome of the Rock inscribed in calligraphy is a reference to Moses. Prof. Stroumsa also left an imprint on me with the rich possibilities and significance of comparative studies of the Abrahamic religions. The erudition of his scholarly work and expertise can add objectivity and give further understanding to other academics who study the Middle East. Not only will those in the academy profit from Prof. Stroumsa's approach, but so will politicians, statesmen, and foreign policymakers—those who need the voice of judgment, reason, and intellect in the frontlines. With more education and self-reflection, the Esplanade can one day be the symbol of common ground for all three faiths, that is to say, where the Divine and Human meet at the confluence of the past, present, and future. Therefore, if fruitful dialogue and action on Jerusalem's contested space is ever to be achieved, an honest

“With more education and self-reflection, the Esplanade can one day be the symbol of common ground for all three faiths”

and transparent partnership between politicians and intellectuals is a welcome development.

Finally, I did not leave with any utopic vision that Jerusalem will live up to its name as the City of Peace overnight, but I left with a new sense of appreciation for the mission and objectives of the Lubar Institute and the importance of its programming along with similar efforts of other institutions around the country organizing opportunities like this event for conversations on religion with mutual understanding and friendship. All in all, I left the event reflecting that the stakes in the Arab-Israeli debate is not simply a matter for Abrahamic religions but for all of humanity. The “Sacred Esplanade” program was no less impressive, and no less noteworthy than Obama's visit to UW-Madison.

The truths we tell: Anthony Shadid

Umer Dar, Student Fellow



photo by Lukas Keapproth

On December 2, 2010, Anthony Shadid, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and UW alumnus, lectured on “The Truths We Tell: Reporting on Faith, War, and the Fate of Iraq,” in front of a riveted audience. Speaking about his experiences reporting in the town of Thuluyah, Iraq, Shadid painted a very different picture of Iraq than have the mass media and pleaded with the audience to be critical of each and every representation of the event.

He began by describing how Thuluyah was transformed from a quiet, beautiful town to a violent, conflict ridden area. The main reason for this change was the U.S. presence in Iraq. The Iraqi people believed that the U.S. was an occupying force that created destruction; dozens of homes and scores of people were killed at the hands of foreigners who were supposed to help form a legitimate government. Shortly after the invasion began in March 2003, American soldiers began scouring the country searching for insurgents. In one episode that Shadid related, three individuals thought to be insurgents were killed. The community was in shock and disbelief. The informant believed to have given the names of these individuals to the U.S., a man named Sabah, was shunned by the community. Shortly following this event, townspeople gave Sabah’s family the ultimatum: kill him, or be killed themselves. The father chose to kill his son to spare the rest of his family. “Unintended Consequences” was what Shadid called the events in Iraq; the U.S. came as a liberator, but turned into an occupier and a catalyst for many unforeseeable and unfortunate occurrences. Events like Sabah’s death fueled the growth of the insurgency, since people believed they were defending their nation against the U.S. Shadid claims the town of Thuluyah has come full circle in 2011 and has returned to the violent state of 2003.

Thinking about the lecture, I kept linking the problems in Thuluyah to the personal lives of the men and women living in Iraq, imagining the difficult choices they faced on a daily basis. All over Iraq, families would be divided between those who supported and those who opposed the insurgency. Since the Iraqi people felt helpless during the war, many jumped at the chance to regain control of their lives. However, not everyone agreed with the way many were trying to recapture freedom. The Iraqis were at war not only with the U.S. but also with one another.

Anthony Shadid’s lecture did more than speak about Iraq; it also showed Iraqi Muslims as real people, not just faceless “insurgents.” Like non-Muslims, they face personal hardships and difficult moral issues that they decide in complex ways, not just on the basis of what “their religion tells them.” LISAR’s Undergraduate Forum provides a platform from which to discuss, and attempt to understand, the beliefs of Muslims in just this way. Although the reactions of the people in Iraq may seem outrageous, looking at their background helps put everything into perspective. Peoples’ choices in the story can be more easily understood if one tries to understand their religious beliefs. Context and history are essential for understanding religion. From there, people can more fully comprehend each other’s faiths.

A journey of faith through interfaith friendships

Eric Ogi, Student Fellow

I grew up in Kewaskum – a small, rural southeastern Wisconsin town where the cows outnumber the people. Beyond a Catholic church and a few Protestant churches, there is little noticeable diversity in Kewaskum, religious or cultural. It wasn't until I came to UW-Madison that I met a Jew or a Muslim.

After 9/11, I, like some other Americans, equated Islam with terrorism. Looking back, it is scary how easy it was to label an entire group of people I knew nothing about in such a way. And I must confess honestly that my understanding of Judaism wasn't much better. I didn't harbor these prejudices intentionally. In fact, I don't think I even realized that I had them. But I didn't know any Muslims or Jews who could challenge and illuminate my ignorance. The unfortunate reality is that I was comfortable with who and what I knew, and as a white, Protestant Christian of strong German descent living in Wisconsin I never really had to leave that comfort zone.

As I stepped onto the UW-Madison campus, however, this ground of comfort began to shift beneath me. I was walking into a completely new world. My peers came from every U.S. state and 131 countries. They were Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist,

Hindu, atheist, agnostic, and so on. Nevertheless, I quickly nestled into my niche, choosing the comfort of familiarity over the vulnerability required for stepping into the unknown. But the sterility of living in a bubble is suffocating, especially when you can see the majesty of life all around you. I was becoming restless with the mirage that I had believed to be life and faith. My innocent but constant prayer, "God, may your will be done in me," was leading me into the unknown from which I had sheltered myself. At first, this was not at all out of my own initiative – I went to an exam study group for my class on the New Testament and met Huda, a Muslim and fellow Religious Studies major; I was studying alone at the Union when I was approached by Volkan, a new student on campus from Turkey. With these "Divinely appointed encounters," I was forced to face all those prejudices that I had held for so long. This time, though, it was personal. I decided to actively pursue interfaith friendships, and through the Lubar Institute met more incredible Jewish and Muslim students. Closing my own eyes that I might see through theirs, a whole new world of life and faith has been illuminated before me.

Four years after stepping foot into this new world and on the cusp of graduating, I never would have

guessed I would be who I am today. Beyond the wealth of wisdom and experience I have gained in the classrooms, and beyond the debt I owe to the Christian ministries I have been a part of – my Jewish and Muslim friends are the ones who left the most noticeable imprint on me. Their lives of faith devoted to prayer, humility, justice, and service have challenged the unfounded assumptions I had carried with me into college – assumptions that divided rather than united, that destroyed life rather than gave it. Seeing my friends daily live out their commitment to God's love has both challenged and encouraged me in my own journey of faith as a Christian. They have opened my eyes to a new way of seeing the world, and I am a better person because of them. But, I never would have known this if I hadn't allowed God's Spirit to lead me in a direction I had not envisioned.

As I leave this great university, I carry with me lasting friendships. More than merely learning to "tolerate" one another, my Jewish and Muslim friends and I have become as brothers and sisters. The Lubar Institute has been an instrumental part of this journey for me, and I believe it will continue to be a profound witness on this campus and in the world that we are better together.

Thering Fellow Arnold Eisen

Laura Partain, Student Fellow



The Lubar Institute hosted Arnold Eisen in late October as this year's Thering Fellow. Eisen is a world-renowned expert on American Judaism and the current Chancellor at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Not only was he gracious enough to visit Wisconsin for a speaking event, but he also took time to meet with the undergraduate and graduate fellows for a luncheon.

At the luncheon, Eisen's raised the question as to why the Hebrew Bible did not begin with the story of Noah. After all, due to the flood, Noah is the most recent ancestor of humanity. What message could the story of Adam and Eve have that would deem it necessary to include in the Bible in light of the suggestion that human history really begins with Noah? Eisen argued that the two creation stories actually serve as the basis for pluralism and are important for establishing interreligious dialogue by emphasizing relationships among mankind. He used the Creation stories in Genesis to describe what he called the "Majestical Side" and the "Personal Side" of humanity. Eisen believes that these two narratives are meant to magnify the importance of having both a spiritual life balanced out by a social life. This point was especially relevant to every college student in the room, as he pointed out that a healthy lifestyle shouldn't be dominated by their studies alone. The relation of the Creation story was

not lost on his audience; I was struck by the fact that the need to balance work and play has been stressed since the beginning of humanity. Social relationships allow humans to explore a side of religion that cannot be found only through academic research; it provides a shadow of the relationship that humans can experience with the divine. Through connecting, society can realize the love and comfort that can be sought in one another as intended by God. Relationships also open people up to their shared humanity, and allow the perception of someone from a different faith background to be seen not as an "other," but rather as "another." Though understandings may vary, religious pluralism promotes dialogue and understanding among faiths. Through discussions of differences, similarities, and history, its goal is to cultivate respect so that peace can be possible.

Pluralism among religions is built on respect, but Eisen says it is also built on the Covenant from the Hebrew Bible that is a promise to all people who believe in YHWH. As previously stated, the Noahic Creation Story emphasizes personal relationships. It is through these very relationships that "cooperation is bridged." Eisen believes that people can have different faiths but still celebrate together. In fact, it is through appreciation of separate traditions that people may find connections, such as the two

“The relation of the Creation story was not lost on his audience; I was struck by the fact that the need to balance work and play has been stressed since the beginning of humanity.”



In this past year, interfaith dialogue has become more important to me than ever before. So when Huda and Levi, the leaders of the Muslim-Jewish Volunteer Initiative (MJVI), approached me about helping organize the Christian portion of a Coexistence Seder, I was eager to join them. Actually, that is an understatement. In fact, their invitation nearly brought me to tears. Having been active in Christian ministries on campus throughout college, I know how easy it is to insulate oneself within one particular community. While these communities are extremely important, the reality is that we live in a world with an ever-increasing awareness of and commitment to global issues; thus, it is necessary to move beyond our own communities and venture to see the world through the eyes of our neighbors.

The co-existence seder

Eric Ogi, Student Fellow

There are different approaches to this moving process. I have been a part of formal large group meetings where students present the orthodox stance of their religious tradition on various topics such as interfaith marriage, sexuality, religion and science, and numerous others. I have also had heartfelt one-on-one conversations with my Muslim and Jewish friends. But this spring's Coexistence Seder was the interfaith experience I had been longing for: the uniting of a large and wildly diverse group of young, ambitious students earnestly seeking to understand the ways in which God is present in one another's lives and in our broken world, so that together we might live into God's redemptive plan for humanity.

Individual conversations and educational presentations are important for reaching the goal of interfaith organizations, but they are not the goal themselves. This spring's Coexistence Seder went beyond both of these by providing the intimate setting of personal conversations,

while fueling a large group of students without making them feel as though they had to represent their entire tradition – just themselves and their own understanding and experience of God. As such, I believe it was a crucial step in the actualization the true goal of interfaith organizations: the building of a movement that takes serious God's call to actively love God and love our neighbor with all that we are. This movement was exemplified in the Coexistence Seder as it brought people from various nations, tongues, ideologies, and religions to the same table to break bread together, who then departed with a renewed passion and vision to engage the brokenness of the world through lives that worship God together.

This is why Huda and Levi's invitation for my Christian sisters and brothers and me to break bread with them nearly brought me to tears. And now, I am anxious to see how this movement will continue to grow, and how it will impact the world, both locally and globally.

important commandments that are seen in the three religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart" and "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Eisen made clear that a "sense of security" is necessary before pluralistic conversations can begin. If people do not trust one another, they will be less likely to trust what is being said or feel comfortable revealing some of their most personal beliefs. Without mutual respect among believers of various faiths, there will be little room for inter-religious peace. Eisen ended his speech with the comment that not one faith has the place to claim a monopoly on God. I believe that it is up to the people of separate faiths to experience each other's religions. This interaction encourages personal spiritual growth, and promotes a feeling of security that will allow for religious discussion to place on an international level.

Hope Lutheran Church in Milton

Justin Perelman, Student Fellow



Honestly, I did not know how the trip to the Hope Lutheran Church of Milton, Wisconsin, would turn out. As with all things unknown, there is only so much one can imagine. There may have been reason for worry. After all, I had never gone to a church before. And yet, I tried not to think of the night's activity in terms of the fearful unknown but rather as an enjoyable way to get to know the fellows and the wider world. The day was sunny, warm and open to possibility. As I walked to the starting point of the LISAR adventure, I basked in the everyday excitement of new experience.

We met on the stairs in front of the Chazen museum and broke the minimal social apprehension with small talk. The car ride took about forty-five minutes and was quite joyous. I would guess that all fears were quickly extinguished when we met the pastor who had helped

to arrange the event. Her name was Rachael, and she was young and vibrant and extraordinarily welcoming. She probably thanked us six times before we even walked into the church.

The students and a few parents slowly trickled in through the basement double-doors. It seemed several of the guys had come from football practice. Many of them were laughing and goofing around. As it turned out, a few moms had brought us baked goods: a set of banana bread and apple crisp for each of us. As Laura noted, they even were allowing us to keep the nice sets of Tupperware they stored the food in; what a warm welcome!

After the parents got a few of the more rowdy guys to settle down, Rachael said a few prayers. This was eye opening to me, as I had never really heard Christian prayer

before. I slowly dropped my head in prayer and respectfully listened. In my listening I found that they were praying for similar things that my Jewish counterparts pray for in synagogue.

After the prayer, each of us presented a little background information concerning why we had joined LISAR and how we practiced our faith in everyday life. Umer and I decided it would be best for the three Christian fellows to present first; perhaps it would better set the stage for the two unfamiliar Abrahamic religions. However, as fate would have it, there was little need for this; my unprepared, and Umer's prepared, antics received immediate approval from the group.

I said that I was from a suburb of DC, was a senior at the University of Wisconsin, and was majoring in religious studies. Then I honestly blanked on what to say next, only to stammer something along the lines of "And, oh yeah, I am Jewish." This caused an uproar of warmhearted laughter. Umer got the crowd roused through a slightly different technique. He said, "I know you guys are thinking of the typical stereotype of an Arab: a turban-wearing, extremely hairy guy speaking a gobbly-gook language." This portrayal brought the house down with laughter, especially from the most eccentric ninth grader.

It is interesting that we both used humor to introduce ourselves. Perhaps, when confronted with intimidating situations, this is the easiest course to take. Religion deals with very serious matters so inter-religious dialogue will inevitably give rise to tension. As open, tolerant, and friendly as the church group was, there was still a legitimate threshold that needed to be crossed. In our cases, we quickly gave to light to these differences, and in doing so, helped to ease the tension.

The next stage of the night was the question/answer group stage. The sixteen or so church members broke up into groups, with at least one parent in each group. The set-up was that I, the Jewish fellow, would be at one table. Umer, the Muslim fellow, would be at another table. Renu, practicing Orthodox Christianity, would be at another, and then Laura and Eric, practicing Protestants, occupied the last table. Ulrich Rosenhagen, LISAR's Assistant Director, jumped excitedly from table to table, documenting the abundance of interfaith dialogue taking place.

It soon occurred to me that I would have to answer any and all questions about Judaism for people who knew very little about the religion. I put a big smile on my face and encouraged them to ask away; I would not be embarrassed or sensitive, the point was to talk and learn. The first group hit me with the toughest questions: why don't Arabs and Jews get along in Israel, do you see any end to it, is there any sort of interfaith dialogue over there? Of course, I prefaced these questions and most all questions with a reminder that I was by no means an expert; that I could only answer

from my humble and minimally knowledgeable perspective.

It was really eye opening for me to meet people that knew very little about my religion. Further, it was really interesting for me to have to explain what Judaism thought about many of the tenets of Christianity. I never could have imagined I would be giving answers to such profound questions to church members in rural Wisconsin. There were many simple questions as well: what are those things called that Jews wear

“I put a big smile on my face and encouraged them to ask away; I would not be embarrassed or sensitive, the point was to talk and learn.”

on the tops of their head, and do you know Hebrew? In having to answer these questions, regardless of the degree of difficulty, I could now understand the people who said they felt uncomfortable speaking on behalf of a religion.

Honestly, though, the experience was not as unsettling as it might seem. There was definitely an underlying assumption that none of us were experts and that we could impart only what we knew. In this way, we recognized that it was not the knowledge of intricate details, but rather the act of conversation itself that would prove most rewarding. The gains were to be made in talking

to people who had been raised differently from us, not through systematic analysis of all the religious disparities that exist. Once one thinks of inter-religious dialogue in this manner—everyday dialogue concerning a somewhat unique subject—as opposed to a very formal engagement with matters of life and death at hand, I believe more people will be willing to try it out.

Plus, the conversation did not always center on religion. Being restless teenagers, many of the boys also tried to talk about Wisconsin sports, their siblings at the university, and video games and movies. I engaged these casual topics too; I found it very rewarding to discuss matters that we could all relate to. It was great to be reminded that the differences being discussed were also accompanied by a vast amount of similarities.

Of course, the parents would casually suggest getting back to the more relevant religious topics and the kids would quickly focus. While the parents asked the majority of the questions, the kids asked some too. The few shy ones that did not were still unwavering in their attention, respectfulness, and smiles. I could not have felt more welcome.

As we said our goodbyes and drove home, the Black SUV was filled with a subtle sense of accomplishment. Our talk was a little more somber, as fatigue and reflection slowly crept in. The social apprehension that may have been present at first had definitely diminished. We, as LISAR fellows, had first-hand experience in our program's fundamental objective and a very rewarding and uncommon event to add to our lives' narratives.

Dr. Aisha Al-Mannai visits UW-Madison

Eric Ogi, Student Fellow



More than a hundred students, professors and community members packed the hall to hear Dean Al-Mannai deliver an arresting lecture entitled “Islam’s View of Other Religions.” Even those without a seat refused to be turned away, sitting along the walls and walkways, or watched from the hallway or an overflow room.

As the title of her lecture suggests, Dean Al-Mannai sought to elucidate the orthodox Islamic view of other religions. Clarity on this issue was especially relevant in light of the stir this past year surrounding the building of the Park 51 Islamic Center in New York and other mosques around the country, as well as the rise of Islamophobia. Drawing from the Qur’an, Hadith, and Shari’a, Al-Mannai emphasized that, at its core, Islam is a religion of peace that seeks to create space for adherents of other religious traditions, especially its Abrahamic siblings, Judaism and Christianity. As the Qur’an states, *“The same religion has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah...and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus”* (42:13). And again, *“We [Muslims] believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you [Jews and Christians]; our Allah [God] and your Allah [God] is One”* (29:46). This is true Islam, despite the overwhelmingly negative image forged by radicals who continue to garner attention because of their extreme use of violence and intolerance for others. The unfortunate reality is that, even though Al-Mannai’s depiction is the mainstream Islamic view, it is largely left out of the nightly news and thus the popular cognizance. In the end, the dean’s words instilled a desire in many of those present to reflect deeper on Islam and our Muslim

neighbors, as was apparent in the numerous conversations continued as people left the building and continued out into the streets.

For LISAR staff and fellows, however, Dean Al-Mannai’s visit included an additional private meeting. This seemed only fitting since Al-Mannai herself is a founding member of an interfaith organization in Qatar. One of the aims of this meeting was to establish a relationship between LISAR and her organization. While the specifics are still being worked out, we are hopeful that the future will see LISAR fellows and Dean Al-Mannai’s students participating together in interfaith conferences both in Madison and Qatar.

Additionally, this meeting gave each of us a unique opportunity to engage Dean Al-Mannai on a personal level. For me, it was a chance to confront a number of the stereotypes I have heard or previously held myself. First, it was asked why she and other Muslim leaders and peacemakers have not publicly decried the violent tactics of Muslim extremists. In fact, we learned, she and many others, including the leaders of the Islamic Society of North America, have done so numerous times – their voices, however, have largely gone unheard. As the first female dean of Shari’a law in an Arab country, we were also curious as to how she was received by her male colleagues. “As



The Coexistence Seder was an incredibly rewarding event to plan because it helped me think about my fundamental motivations behind organizing interfaith dialogue: that the Abrahamic faiths share so much, and that these shared values are the basis for cooperation and action. Unlike most coexistence dinners, which create spaces to help us engage differences in opinion on certain issues, the Coexistence Seder was modeled around the idea that we would take a few key themes of the Passover Seder and find examples of how they resonate in Christianity and Islam. Rather than start from a place of difference to prove that we had a lot in common, the Coexistence Seder let us take something we all share—Exodus—and celebrate the ways that it figures uniquely into each of our faiths.

The co-existence seder

Levi Prombaum, Student Fellow

We ended up looking through the Seder and picking three moments—the four sons, the Seder plate, and the telling of the Passover story itself—to inspire dialogue about the broader themes of interfaith and intrafaith tolerance, symbolization and celebration, and the role that Passover plays in our faiths personally and communally. We also had a dialogue about struggle and liberation, and the role of faith in a modern context.

I walked away from the Seder with a much better understanding of how Exodus, and the themes that it encompasses, enrich each faith. I was compelled to look into Jewish tradition and see the constant references to Egypt and slavery, and think more seriously about how this strong emphasis on overcoming oppression and embracing the privileges and responsibilities of freedom is at the root of my passion to do good in the world. I was able to see how Christian celebration of the story of Passover functions on

multiple levels, and appreciate the power of seeing Jesus' sacrifice for humanity as a mirror for the Passover sacrifice. Lastly, the Quran's exegesis of the components of the Exodus story dealing with the hubris of Pharaoh and the faith and patience of the slaves helped me learn more about the structure of Islam's sacred text and helped me appreciate those themes when my family sat down for the Seder a week after the dialogue.

On a personal level, the Coexistence Seder was successful beyond the tasty food, the great people and the interesting conversation. It gave me a new way to grow from interfaith opportunities. When you start a conversation from a place of supposed difference, it's a great feeling to realize that there's so much in common, and to walk away with a sense of the other person's humanity. But when you ground that humanity as an assumption rather than as something that needs to be proved, you create an invaluable way to build friendship and community.

a mother," she replied readily; they treat her with respect, and they honor her position, and even come to her for advice at times. Her motherly disposition was apparent in her sincere interest in our experiences as LISAR fellows and university students, and so we shared the ways in which LISAR has given a voice to our growing engagement with both our local and global neighbors. The undergraduate forum creates a network of students who are actively pursuing a life of faith, higher education, and a better understanding of their neighbors' religious traditions. This model is rooted in education and respect. Likewise, we learned, this is central to the approach and goals of Dean Al-Mannai in Qatar. I am hopeful that future LISAR fellows will get to experience the fruit of Dean Al-Mannai's visit, just as we were blessed to be a part of the initial conversation.

This is your brain on religion:

Justin Perelman, Eric Ogi and Renu Paul, Student Fellows



Buddhist Monk Matthieu Ricard at Waisman Center. Photo by Jeff Miller, UW-Madison, University Communications © Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System

“The fruit of their partnership was a stimulating series of presentations and conversations between leading scientists of behavioral neuroscience, nationally recognized religious scholars, and a well-informed audience.”

UW-Madison has proven to be a place where innovative ideas matter and cutting-edge research is its *raison d'être*. This was clearly the case at a spring symposium convened on the campus as the result of a partnership between the Lubar Institute and the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds (CIHM). The fruit of their partnership was a stimulating series of presentations and conversations between leading scientists of behavioral neuroscience, nationally recognized religious scholars, and a well-informed audience. The result was a better understanding of the nature and potential of contemplative spirituality on mental and physical well-being.

The day began with the articulate, organized, and intriguing presentation, “Buddhist Meditation: A Case in Point for Collaborative Research.” The two presenters, Professor John Dunne of Emory University and Professor Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, worked well off one another; you could tell they had a deep respect for each other’s abilities and truly believed in the importance of their research. Professor Dunne proved his deep knowledge of Buddhism by detailing different Buddhist schools of thought and meditation practices, while also debunking certain commonly held American myths about Buddhism.

Professor Davidson outlined the recent NIH report concerning Buddhist meditation and health, which concluded that there was no evident correlation between the two. He also discussed the advantage of studying Buddhist monks: their years of meditation and mindfulness practice allow them better understanding of their own minds, so their descriptions of their minds can be more trusted than those of the average American. Additionally, he included many pictures showing their initial experiments on Buddhist monks; it was intriguing to see these holy men attached to all sorts of wires, and entering into large medical scanning devices. From these, one really got the feeling that vastly different worlds were colliding.

Overall, the first leg of the neuroscience and religion symposium was a great start to the day; I seriously considered skipping all of my classes because I was so impressed by the intelligence of these men and their grasp of this newly developing field. They seemed to hold a deep respect for the religion, and so I am hopeful that their forays will continue to extract certain useful truths while also preserving the beauty of religious expression. Perhaps their efforts will foster even greater respect between the two fields of science and religion. This well-informed presentation left me realizing that, as religious people, we should not be fearful

Neuroscience and the world's major religions



of the interaction between science and religion; rather, we should celebrate the coming together of two approaches to understanding the world that have long been thought to be antagonistic.

The conference continued with a paper by Elliot Wolfson of New York University, one of today's great interpreters of medieval Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah. The paper was presented by LISAR's director Professor Charles Cohen, since Professor Wolfson himself experienced travel difficulties and was unable to attend the conference. Wolfson contributed a close textual reading of the 13th century Spanish Mystic and Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia. To Abulafia, the creation of the world and of man is founded in, and discernable through, combinations of letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In his thinking,

all wisdom and knowledge appear to be a form of text. Accordingly, intensive study of the text of the Kabbalah can lead to deeper insight into the nature of the divine reality in the world and the meaning of the Torah. Wolfson's interpretation was further unfolded and discussed by Alan Weisbard, UW-Madison emeritus Professor of Law, Bioethics, Jewish Studies and Religious Studies. Weisbard pointed at the overall hesitance among Jews to engage with their own mystical traditions. Traditionally, studying Kabbalah is a lifelong process, and reserved only for men. The Kabbalah is usually not taught before the age of forty, when it is safe to assume that the student has already thoroughly studied the Talmud and the Torah. Moreover, Weisbard suggested the study of "contemplative anthropology" as an area of research where neuroscience and religion overlap and might

complement each other. Such a "contemplative anthropology" would study the cultural, social and religious patterns which dispose and build consciousness of the Divine on the side of man. An important contribution to this research would be a re-evaluation of the metaphysical traditions within which the Kabbalah and other mystical teachings develop their epistemologies.

The afternoon began with a session led by Andrew Dreitcer, Assistant Professor of Religion, and History of Christianity at Claremont Graduate College, and Michael Spezio Assistant Professor of Psychology at Scripps College. In a captivating presentation on the early Eastern Christian contemplative practice known as "the Jesus Prayer," Dr. Dreitcer elucidated the ancient notion of the mind existing in the heart. When the reasoning of the mind is coupled with the intellect formed through Divine contact, and both are brought into the heart of one's being, a process of divination (theosis) occurs; that is, one becomes what Jesus was – Divine, active love. This process is realized through practicing dispassion with compassion, and stillness with love and listening as God's grace comes to reside in one's heart. Ultimately, these two practices enable one to focus on the greatest commandment that Jesus gave his disciples: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your

Neuroscience symposium, continued

soul and with all your mind...and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Dr. Spezio followed with an inquiry into the cognitive neuroscience of this practice. The primary aim in utilizing this discipline is to develop better models of mental processes by using neuroscientific data in order to develop neural mechanisms contributing to the mental processes under investigation. Decision-making can be both cognitive and emotional. In applying this understanding to the Jesus prayer, one finds that its main purpose is to lead a new cognitive and emotional direction – new ways of being emotional in relation because emotion is critical for social adaptation. Using an excerpt from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*, Dr. Spezio illustrated how that which starts in one’s mind leads to one’s actions. For neuroscientists, this is known as social cognition; for the Christian, this is known as love.

The second half of the afternoon focused on Islam, specifically the contemplative mystic tradition of Sufism. Vincent Cornell, a scholar of Islam at Emory University, joined Dr. Spezio as the conversation continued. To elucidate this rich tradition, Dr. Cornell focused his efforts on the Sufi devotional act of *zikr* – “remembrance [of God].” This act is performed by slowing

one’s breathing, and uttering “Allah” as one exhales. In doing so, one is letting go of the world. The resultant effect of this mental notion is the Sufi practice of poverty – emptying the heart of all material desires. The zenith of this process is the annihilation of the self and the creation of the second, purified and fully actualized Sufi. In this state, the Sufi has lost all personal attributes, yet has become wholly present.

The culmination of the day-long program was an evening panel discussion before a public audience with summary remarks from each scholar. Richard Davidson, Director of CIHM and close associate of the Dalai Lama, set the introductory tone for the evening’s conversations with his comments that the goal of neuroscience is to “understand the fundamental nature of the mind.” Along with his insights on the suggestive effects of meditation on affect and physical states were those of John Dunne, who helped to tease out the humanistic tenets from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Andrew Dreitcer, once again led the audience through the Jesus Prayer. Vincent Cornell and Alan Weisbard were equally impressive with their insights. Michael Spezio, a behavioral neuroscientist, helped round off the impressive list of luminaries.

Having listened and reflected on each other’s presentations throughout the day, the scholars compared notes on how the various traditions employed concepts, sometimes using the same term to mean very different things, or referring to similar phenomena in rather different ways. Cornell, for example, hinted that “nodes” as part of Sufi vocabulary would refer somewhat analogously to “traits” and “states” in the vocabulary used by the neuroscientist. Such statements lead me to think that deeper study can reveal some unexpected threads underlying the world’s religions, but importantly, between science and religion. What was particularly revealing was that the world’s major religions can help to cultivate virtue and be a vehicle to bring relief to physical and psychic suffering. The symposium was therefore rich on many counts. While inter-religious dialogue was being fostered at the event, science is now taking religion seriously again, especially the pearls found in the contemplative traditions of the world’s religions. When science and religion are more collegial to each other, as was the case at the *This is Your Brain on Religion* event, there is the great promise of bettering the human condition.



Over my four years as a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I have been dedicated to participating in, and advocating for, interfaith dialogue. As a co-chair of the Muslim-Jewish Volunteer Initiative (MJVI), I recognize the importance of interfaith dialogue and action as a positive way to generate peace between different faith communities. Through participating in various interfaith events, I have experienced many beautiful moments, including the Coexistence Seder. This was the first time that MJVI hosted such an event; in the past, dialogue had always been focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with attendees being primarily Muslim or Jewish. This semester we decided to focus on a new theme that would bring members of all three Abrahamic faiths together.

It was really moving to see students eager to learn more about other faiths as well as sharing their own with me. While the connecting point of the dinner was Moses and the story of Exodus, each of the three faiths presented their interpretation of Exodus from their own perspective. The

discussion questions not only allowed for deep reflection on the three perspectives, but also on the perspectives of the individual students themselves. Students were very respectful and understanding towards one another, and I feel that many of them left the dinner with a new understanding of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Many of the discussion questions encouraged students to dig below the surface level and ask themselves “What does this [Exodus, liberation, oppression, etc.] really mean to me?” I think many of them were surprised—in a good way—to see all of the commonalities between the three faiths, as well as how much they could learn from the differences.

For me, the best part of the evening was seeing all of the new Christian faces eager to participate in interfaith dialogue. In the past, MJVI had not reached out to fellow Christian students, and I’m really glad that we did. Christian students are another crucial part of the peace process between faith communities on campus, and I feel that the Coexistence Seder provided a stepping-stone for students to move in this direction. I feel that it is easy to forget that there are so many similarities—besides the differences—between Jews, Muslims and Christians,

The co-existence seder

Huda Bashir, Student Fellow

and it was important to remind everyone of these similarities with the story of Exodus. In the past, even though religious dialogue did come up at Coexistence Dinners between Muslims and Jews, the dialogue was primarily focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Coexistence Seder provided another platform to discuss commonalities, varying between a common religious theme to how community members interacted, between Jews, Muslims and Christians on a level that had yet to be experienced on this campus.

I’m excited and curious to see what the future holds for MJVI on campus. Will Christians be more involved in similar dialogues helping to strengthen relationships with Muslim and Jewish students? Will it expand to include other faith groups on campus? While I think the main focus of the MJVI should still be on Muslim and Jewish student interaction, Christian participation in the Coexistence Seder greatly expanded the MJVI’s mission: to facilitate dialogue, respect and understanding among Muslim and Jewish students on campus. Discussion is absolutely necessary before peace and understanding can be achieved. I almost want to stay for another year to see where all of this momentum will go.

Coexistence Dinner

Tamar Shertok, Student Fellow

A warm, welcoming dinner among mainly Muslim and Jewish students took place on November 18, 2010 at the Ambrosia Co-op in Madison.

The Muslim-Jewish Volunteer Initiative (MJVI), a student organization on campus, organized the Coexistence Dinner, which brought together over forty Muslim and Jewish students for meaningful dialogue. The Muslim-Jewish Volunteer Initiative promotes conversation through creative programming and volunteer projects in order to help foster a better understanding and respect between the faiths. MJVI hosts game nights, dinners, and volunteer opportunities. As LISAR shares the same hopes of promoting dialogue between the Abrahamic traditions, the Institute funded the dinner so that everyone could enjoy delicious Indian food.

After everyone ate and chatted amongst themselves about school happenings, we were divided into small groups with both Muslim and Jewish students in each group and had two break-out sessions. Each person talked about his or her background and answered light questions to break the ice, such as questions about our favorite ice cream flavor or most memorable UW-Madison experience. We then talked about any learning experiences and memories involving faith, gender, and race to help us learn and

gain perspective from our unique backgrounds. In my group, we talked about how our religion shapes our daily lives and about hardships we face on a consistent basis. It was interesting to listen to stories from students from different countries, such as students from Gambia and Pakistan. We learned about cultural religious traditions outside of the United States. The initial conversations highlighted how each of us identifies with our tradition.

The first break-out session focused mainly on the Arab-Israeli conflict and how our respective communities respond to the conflict. Although this is such a controversial and emotional subject, there was a surprisingly relaxed atmosphere in the room, which alleviated any discomfort when discussing our feelings about the conflict. With an open, respectful and comfortable atmosphere, students shared their personal relationships and experiences to the conflict without fear of ostracism and judgment. By freely talking about their beliefs about the Middle East and tackling some of the key misconceptions, students were able to find common ground and develop a mutual respect for one another's upbringing and perspective. Extreme opinions diminished into understanding and an ability to empathize with the opposite tradition.

“The Muslim-Jewish Volunteer Initiative promotes conversation through creative programming and volunteer projects in order to help foster a better understanding and respect between the faiths.”

For the second break-out session, each group could choose a topic to talk about, such as stereotypes and misconceptions, social activism, Park 51, and the Middle East. Even though these topics may have seemed daunting and uncomfortable, students were eager to listen to one another so to gain a greater understanding for the opposite faith. When people focus on differences and dissention, relationships and mutual understanding cannot develop. By tackling some of the controversial issues that are normally avoided in interfaith dialogue, students were able to gain perspective and learn from one another.

In my group, we were able to see that our faiths are not so different and our views are not so extreme; rather, we all believe in coexistence, peace, and humanity. We each strive to do good deeds and perform acts of kindness. We confirmed that the extremists of each tradition form the stereotypes and that the media contributes to the misunderstandings, since the moderate voice is usually not presented to the public. Through interfaith dialogue, these issues came to light. The Coexistence Dinner served as an instrument for promoting conversation and mutual understanding. Interfaith dialogue helps bridge the gap between faiths and illustrates how each Abrahamic faith encompasses humanity and kindness.

Overall, the Coexistence Dinner went smoothly, had a great turn-out, and truly demonstrated that peace is possible between the different faiths. Students, like myself, left the dinner feeling inspired to establish a meaningful coexistence and pleased for having made new friends. Interfaith dialogue ultimately reshaped my conceptions of Islam, illuminating the beauty in the religion through the eyes of the moderate voices.

“The Coexistence Dinner served as an instrument for promoting conversation and mutual understanding. Interfaith dialogue helps bridge the gap between faiths and illustrates how each Abrahamic faith encompasses humanity and kindness.”

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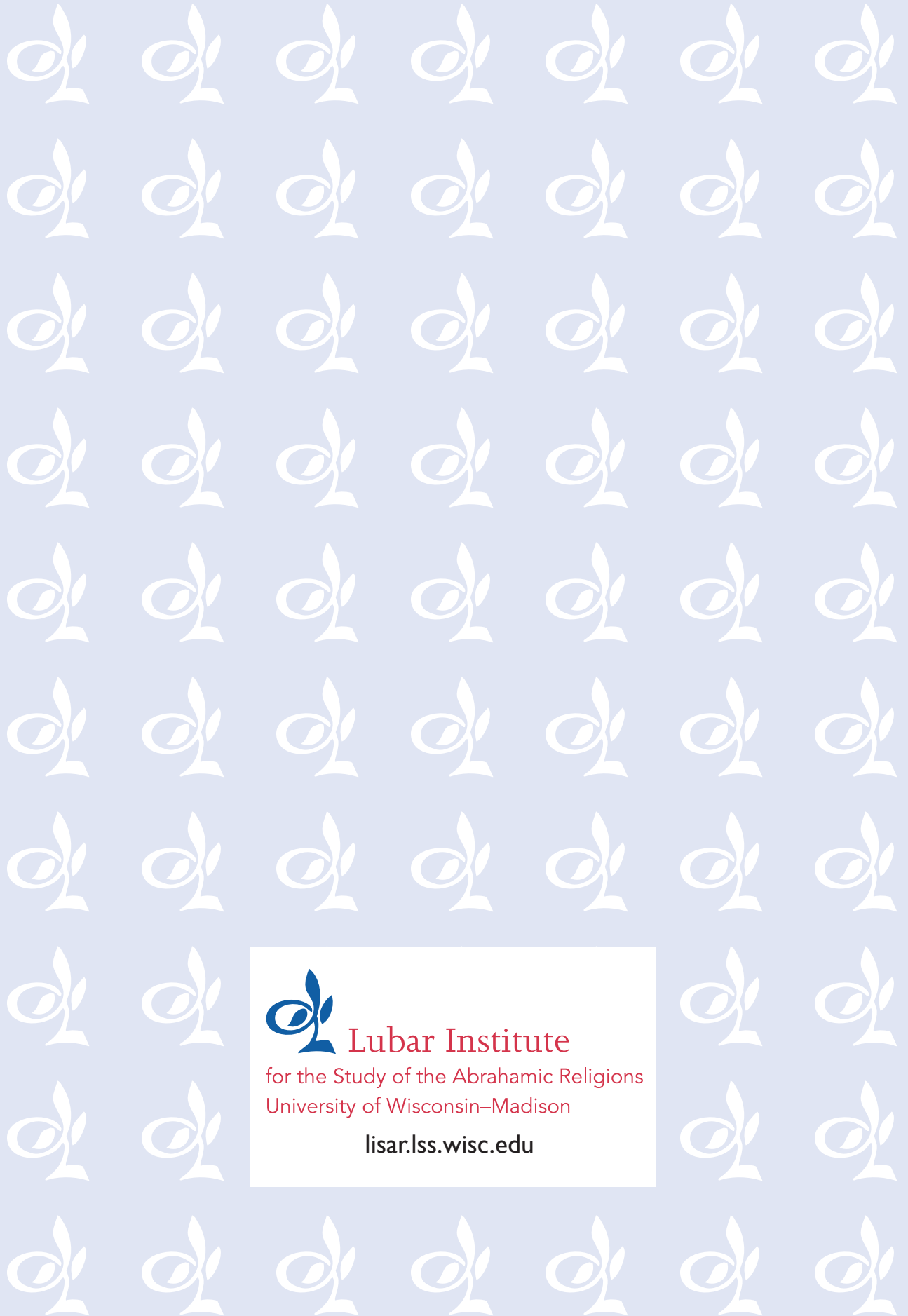
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Please Note: The views expressed in this journal are those of the individual students alone and do not constitute statements on behalf of the Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions.



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